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ABSTRACT

Individualized instruction is defined as a process by which each learner is assisted in developing his own unique path, which may vary not only in rate, but in approach and content as well. There is concern at the present inability to provide such programs. Students must be provided opportunities to receive instruction, each at his own level. To facilitate this, teachers must have an organization which moves emphasis from holding children together for instruction to consciously encouraging the greatest possible span of achievement. The Experimental Teaching Division of the University of Texas R & D Center in Teacher Education examined what happens to teachers and students as they move into new organizations of instruction, seeking to develop an organization in which to train undergraduates in elementary education. Team teaching was selected as the organization to be used in the schools. The team teaching organization is described, and individualized instruction within this organization is outlined. The need is for qualified teachers to implement such procedures; the challenge is to find ways to train such teachers. Efforts in these areas as conducted by the University of Texas R & D Center are described. (Author)

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The University of Texas, Austin

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by

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Today, we are facing a new, but not so new, trend in education called individualized instruction. It has been around for years but suddenly everyone is giving lip service to its need, its desirability, its potential impact on education. It's something like motherhood—everyone's for it. Unfortunately, there appears to be lacking a clear understanding of what this animal is, and even more unfortunate, a lack of real commitment to it.

Inasmuch as we are beginning in somewhat muddy waters, I would like to stir up a little more by discussing with you not just a program of individualized instruction but also focusing your attention upon what we might call a program of individualized education. I do this to help convey my own concept of the topic at hand. For too many, individualized instruction is considered to be the progression of students through the same basic one, two or even three established ruts in the educational process, varying only the rate of progress. I would prefer to think of individualized instruction as that process by which each learner is assisted in developing his own unique path, which may vary not only in rate, but in approach and content as well.

There has been a growing awareness of the inadequacy of our present efforts at providing an individualized program. Most of this concern is originating among educators within the local school systems. On a recent trip in which I observed numerous innovative programs, I repeatedly heard the cry of help extended to those in higher education. In an attempt to arrive at some solution, new organizations and instructional schemes are being grasped, schemes which range from continuous progress plans to departmentalization to team teaching, or combinations thereof.

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Unfortunately, far too many efforts stop immediately after the implementation of a new organization, providing no guarantee that individualized instruction will follow. Any system we implement can become as rigid and as adult centered as the majority of our present classrooms. All the organization can do is facilitate the desired program. For instance, for years educators have been advocating that every teacher should group in achievement in at least the areas of reading, mathematics and spelling. The question arises as to the number of hours in the day not just for the average and mediocre teacher but also for the exceptional teacher. While most of us would agree that an individualized reading program is best, we also know that in our basal reading programs a teacher is doing well to group on three levels. It boils down to a simple matter of arithmetic: how many reading, mathematics, and spelling groups can a single teacher handle. Once this is answered, we must ask if these are sufficient in number to meet the needs of the students. We found that in one of our on-going programs in Austin, Texas, that when we provided three reading groups for fifth year students, students in the top group spanned a range of three and one-half years. Can we accept a span this great under the guise of individualized instruction?

For truly individualized instruction, we must provide students the opportunity to receive instruction more nearly on their level. We must provide teachers an organization that will facilitate this, an organization which moves the emphasis from holding children together for instruction to one of consciously encouraging the greatest span of achievement possible.

To accomplish this, many systems have turned to a departmentalized organization, or some form of it. The rationale is usually that this organization permits both homeogenous grouping and permits the teacher with the greatest strengths in an area to instruct in that area. As I see it, there are a number of problems. First, scheduling becomes rigid. Learning is compartmentalized into specific time blocks, restricting both the teacher and the student. Secondly, it usually restricts the number of groups or levels to the number of class periods in the day. Third, a single teacher is asked to know a child thoroughly while she sees him through one set of eyes and only for a limited time. Fourth, there is little, if any, more communication between teachers than carried on in a self-contained organization. Fifth, and perhaps most serious, while we are being asked by those both in curriculum and cognition to provide students with a greater number of alternatives in their studies, the teacher of a single area can provide no greater scope than a teacher within a self-contained classroom.

For these reasons, as well as others, when the Experimental Teaching Division of the Research and Development Center in Teacher Education at The University of Texas undertook the task of looking at what happens to teachers and students as they move into new organizations of instruction and also the task of seeking an organization in which to train undergraduates in elementary education to aid them in building the relationship between content and instruction, we selected Team Teaching. Immediately upon uttering the words, team teaching, I feel compelled to offer a definition.

This I have found to be necessary. After nine months of operation I find that everyone I meet has his own definition and communication is nearly impossible until we establish common ground. I might also add that I have found very few definitions that I can accept. I am surprised at the number of people who define team teaching almost synonymously with large group instruction. As educators view our program in Austin, the first questions usually heard are "Where do you have large group instruction" and "How many children can you get together at one time?" Let me just say that I am not here to sell team teaching—that is not my purpose. However, the individualization of instruction is the bedrock upon which our program is built and I think that by referring to our program I can better convey what I mean by individualizing instruction. For us, the team teaching organization is providing optimal facility for doing those things which we were unable to do in self-contained classrooms.

We prefer to proceed on the premise that small group instruction, not large group instruction, is the heart of the program. It is with an extremely cautious eye that we study those activities which are carried on in large groups. Certainly there must be large groups to provide opportunity for small groups. However, we prefer to think not of large group instruction but of large group activity. New materials are never introduced in large groups for we feel that the teacher should not be the center of attention for purposes akin to lecture. Introduction of new materials and ideas should proceed in an atmosphere conducive to maximum interaction between students and teacher. No teacher can lecture to thirty students and expect to reach more than half his group, how can we expect better odds in a large group?

Large groups should be reserved for those reinforcing type of activities which do not necessarily demand all students be together. It is here that students could be engaged in small group discussions, investigations, use of programmed materials and audio-tapes, expression through rhythmic activities, or simply working on assignments as follow-up to other instructional groups. To this area I would also assign such activities as viewing instructional television and movies. Thus, in such a heterogenous group there could be any combination of students pursuing any number of pre-determined activities, all under the guidance of a teacher.

As for small group instruction, we have been advocating certain instructional practices for years, and in an attempt to implement these practices, we mave been requiring teachers to attend workshop upon workshop. Most have had little transfer into practice. We in Austin have found, like many others, that we have achieved almost immediate success within a matter of days when teachers were placed into an organization which facilitated these practices. For example, in an intermediate team in Austin, fifteen to eighteen reading levels have been provided the students, levels which range from first year to eighth year. Similar levels have been provided in mathematics and spelling.

For an individualized program we must also think of non-gradedness, which means extreme cooperation between individual teachers of varying grade levels and a reversal of the trend to keep children together. Children in our first year program now span a range in reading and mathematics of readiness through second year, fifth month. Next year these same students may have a different combination of teachers, or some of the same, but

all teachers will be members of the primary team and will pick these students up right where they are. This is truly a continuous progress program.

For individualized instruction, the teacher must be analytical. He must know his students and their needs, and once those needs are assessed, he must be able to provide a program. By placing teachers in a position where they are forced to become more analytical, there is developing a totally new behavior pattern. It is extremely rare that a comment is heard such as, "That Johnny is certainly a hellion. I don't know what to do with him." Rather one can often hear the Johnnys discussed among a group of teachers from the standpoint of, "What is Johnny's problem? What can we collectively try?"

An individualized program of instruction demands providing students with many more alternatives than currently possible. If a program is to be individualized then the student must have the opportunity not only of working on his own level, but approaching the study from a view dictated by his unique interests, abilities and cognitive style. It means that the student who is artistically inclined, but has little or no quantative leanings, should be given the opportunity to pursue a study of science through different eyes. I must hasten to add that this does not absolve us from aiding the student in developing a mathematical background. Likewise, we are told by Bruner and others that there are three systems for processing information and for representing it. If we are to present information to children on the basis of that mode most easily assimilated, we may again be talking of a variety of methods of presentations, more perhaps than a single teacher could effectively accommodate.

Finally, there comes the matter of student interest. To capitalize on this interest and extend it should be the goal of every teacher. To realistically carry this out, we must provide many more alternatives for student investigation than the number which appears to be feasible under the present program.

An individualized program not only demands but results in a different kind of learner. A key word in such a program is responsibility. The student must assume a major responsibility for his own learning. This responsibility does not develop through a process of maturation but demands a continuous, consciously implemented program beginning at the first year of instruction. It cannot be haphazard nor can it be left to the discretion of isolated teachers, but must be a total effort.

The student must be made more aware of his own needs and hiw own growth. He must learn to gain a sense of reward not from the teacher but from his own accomplishments.

The student seldom feels the frustration of total defeat. He is always working in an area or on a level at which he is capable of succeeding.

Our students have been happy learners and their parents have been happy. In the program in Austin, discipline problems as such have just about disappeared. Some of the comments received from parents to date have been: "Our child enjoys school so much this year that it is difficult to keep him home when he is ill," and "My child has never taken such an interest in school before," and "I feel as though my child wasted the entire first half of the year until he got into the program."

There is no doubt that to carry out an individualized program of instruction demands quality teachers. Teachers who are flexible, analytical, objective, possess knowledge of new programs and materials, and have an ability to prescribe an educational program for students. That is quite a task. There are only two avenues that I now see for achieving it. First, teacher training institutions must begin preparing teachers for the educational programs of the future, not teachers, no matter how excellently trained, for programs which are even now beginning to disappear into the past. Too many of our graduates, including those of The University of Texas, are beginning their careers with closed minds rather than a willingness to try, with preconceived notions rather than a willingness to accept new ideas, with a view of change as something to fear rather than the expected, a concept of education as being a function of the teacher rather than a function of the learner, and a willingness to teach with a bag of tricks and a pocket full of information without perceiving the relationship between the two. Sadly, I've even heard colleagues support an inductive approach to instruction, not for its role in learning, but because the teacher presumably does not need to know as much.

While we at universities and colleges are beginning to awaken to the problems, I have a distinct fear that the lag will continue until the local school officials begin demanding a differently trained teacher to fit the new program. However, there are two sides to the coin. If we began producing the desired teacher this very minute, most would find themselves in the conventional classroom. This we have found true for a large number of the

undergraduates we have trained in our pro-ram in Austin. A second problem here is the high loss which we can expect of these people entering the teaching profession during their first five years of teaching.

The second direction we can go is through in-service education for existing teachers. However, I have the feeling that neither more workshops nor direct district supervision will materially improve the program. We have found, however, that intra-group supervision has been extremely effective. By this I mean that the one most essential ingredient for a successful team teaching program has also resulted in substantial teacher growth--the teacher planning sessions. Teachers on each of our teams plan jointly for an hour to an hour and a half three days per week. While focus is upon the curriculum, teachers freely toss about ideas for strengthening the program, ideas for working with students, and ideas for strengthening instruction in given areas. Each teacher selects an area of greatest interest to become a semi-specialist and it is in the planning session that the teacher utilizes her speciality through providing leadership by directing the planning operations in that area. These people are identified by team members as resource people and are often invited to sit in on groups, make suggestions, and assist in identifying students who need to receive special help or who are ready to move up to the next level. This supervision is always immediately available, it is supportative rather than threatening, coming from one viewed as a co-worker rather than a distant individual cloaked with the title, supervisor. And finally, it forces the teachers as a unit to view their instruction objectively. I must add that there is not a team with which we are associated in which we do not feel that the quality of

instruction has improved markedly, that the teachers are not more analytical, flexible and concerned with the students and their curriculum than they were prior to entering the program.

I have on occassion referred to programs that we now have in operation. At present we are developing non-graded team teaching programs in the Brentwood Elementary School in Austin, Texas and will begin developing a second program in the Metz Elementary School in September. While Brentwood draws from a predominately middle class Anglo-Saxon neighborhood, Metz students are predominately Mexican-American.

A third major program we have underway is at Cypress-Fairbanks, a community near Houston. Here we are developing a non-graded, team teaching program, grades one through twelve for a total system of approximately five thousand students. It is in this system that we are opening in September a new school which excites the imagination. The school, Matzke Elementary School, has been built to accommodate approximately seven hundred students in two teaching suites. These instructional suites are separated by a resource center which occupies the space equivalent to approximately nine classrooms. This area is the heart of the program. Nothing is anchored, everything is flexible--curriculum, scheduling, furniture. The program for this school is currently in the developmental stages but includes such features as a five prong program in reading in the primary grades. A student having difficulty can be adjusted not only by levels but also by approaches. Grade-wise, there are two divisions, a primary and an intermediate, each under the direction of a team of eight to twelve teachers.

The program of individualization of instruction which we have been discussing this morning has some very formidable stumbling blocks--problems which we are just beginning to attack.

First, there is the problem of curriculum materials. As teachers develop new organizations of instructions, they yet have before them the conventional curriculum and materials developed for that curriculum. In team teaching we usually agree that one of the major strengths is that a team of teachers can present students a program of considerably greater scope than a single teacher. Yet when we examine the typical team teaching programs or review the research reported, the programs invariably begin with a well defined packet of information, basically the same as that taught by an individual teacher.

A second problem with curriculum materials is the identification of materials or units applicable for a non-graded approach. Too many materials are developed based upon the conventional graded system. We at The University of Texas are quite interested in this problem. We must begin developing materials which provide students with the opportunity to both develop the necessary planned frames of reference and also provide optimal room for individualized depth studies through maximum use of teaching teams. A model of instruction in team teaching for the development of appropriate units is currently underway. The models utilized in self-contained classrooms and departmentalized classrooms are not adequate for our purposes.

A second major problem in developing programs for individualized instruction is providing the teacher with adequate hardware for instruction. To do the job, the teacher must have access to media--media not only for teaching but media primarily for learning. We need to open new avenues for data input. We must begin looking at such things as encapsulated tape recorders which six year olds can operate, or individual filmstrip previewers which Harry, the poor reader, can take home to study, or the microfilm reader, which for a few dollars can greatly increase our resource capacity, or the overhead projector with a hard surface screen on which the student can perform operations, or the programmed text and other materials, such as the SRA reading programs, and even, in the not too distant future, Computer Assisted Instruction. In short, we are going to have to make the tools of learning accessible to the students. One area which interests me greatly is instructional television. For years we have pleaded with the teacher to be selective in its use, and at the same time we have provided her with nothing but mammoth screens for large group viewing. Even worse, we have known that in many areas, such as Spanish, all students were not ready for the presentation. The results have been frustration, boredom, and an abundance of negative attitudes. I would hope that the time has come when we can begin toying with small portable sets with accompanying headphones, that students in groups of one to four could work with television in areas of interest in need.

For truly individualized instruction, we need these tools today, not tomorrow.

A third problem, one mentioned earlier, is that of securing teachers prepared in the skills necessary to carry out individualized instruction. We need flexible teachers, objective teachers, professional teachers. While a few programs, such as ours, are attempting to develop this teacher, if there is to be a decisive move in this direction, the majority of our teachers must be developed from those practioners now in the field.

A final problem is that of equipment for such flexible programs. Certainly the school plant is a contributing factor but a conventional plant is not nearly so limiting as conventional equipment. While the program at Matzke Elementary School will be greatly facilitated by the flexibility of the building, equally good programs are possible in any of our other plants. However, a flexible program demands flexible furniture and equipment, furniture and equipment not now available. I would like to add, that at least one manufacturer has voiced a desire to meet the demands of our program and we are currently working with them for the development of such equipment.

In the final analysis, how far we move in the direction of individualized instruction and the rate at which we move will be dependent upon you, the leaders within the local school districts and your commitment to the concept. If you are truly committed, we will reach our objective, and soon. If your commitment is based upon self preservation as a result of external pressures, we may also show improvement, though not as impregnated into our internal fiber. However, if your concern is to mouth terminology, appear knowledgeable and innovative in the eyes of peers, and to join the passing parade, then we will not succeed--and unfortunately, it will not be us, but the children who are the losers.

Our movements must be calculated. Too many of us are too anxious to buy a quality program--it is much easier than building. For proof we need only to look at the multitude of next-to-useless gadgets and kits that are selling so successfully on the market. Observation of what is happening to many of the new mathematics and science programs is further evidence. There is too much implementation with too little understanding of the underlying rationale. How can we judge success unless we know what it is we are attempting to teach? Fortunately, a program of individualized instruction must be built from within. There are no short cuts, no easy purchases--it is hard work which must be done at the level of the classroom teacher.

If your commitment is strong enough, then this I think I can promise you now:

First, your initial cost will increase due to the many materials your teachers probably do not have and of which most are probably not aware even exist. Don't panic, however, for research indicates that after the initial expenditure your costs will drop to just a little above where they were before initiating the program. After all, your teachers will be more aware of their program, more aware of the students needs, and more aware of what is available.

Second, your instructional staff will become more professional in every respect.

Third, your curriculum will become richer. As teachers become more flexible and more knowledgeable of things possible, they will bring new meaning to the curriculum and new interpretations based upon the needs of your students.

Fourth, and most important, your students will develop into much more active learners.